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ABSTRACT

The causes of reading problems were studied in order to plan and implement reading programs for their prevention and correction. Some of the environmental causes related to socioeconomic disadvantagement which were discussed are distracting family problems, frequent moving, and few educational-related activities in the home. The family life is also important in forming the child's self-concept; a poor self-concept may interfere with learning to read. Reading failure can also be traced to inappropriate activities and methods used in the schools. The classroom teacher is not the only person responsible for the child's lack of progress in reading, but a great deal does depend on her understanding of the child as a person, his readiness at any level, and the methods by which he learns best. Because not all problems can be handled by the teacher in corrective reading groups, the school is responsible to provide for ancillary reading programs where children will get help in small groups or on a one-to-one basis. The services of a skilled clinician may sometimes be necessary. It is also the responsibility of the school to use its resources and personnel in efficient ways. Summer schools and the use of volunteers are advocated. A bibliography is included. (DH)

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The causes of reading problems are very complex. Children come to school expecting to learn to read, and most children, parents, and teachers know that the key to success in school is the ability to read materials in each subject area. Yet, 15 to 20 percent of the children in school have a reading problem (18). An understanding of the educational and environmental causes of reading problems will help in the planning and implementation of reading programs that will prevent or correct reading problems.

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Environmental Causes of Reading Problems

The home and neighborhood environments of children directly relate to the causes of reading problems (7) (19). Little encouragement or motivation, practices that develop a poor self-concept, undesirable

relationships between parents and children, distracting environmental conditions, frequent moving, and a lack of emphasis on achievement in school are environmental factors that can cause reading problems.

Motivation. The motivation of children from socially disadvantaged homes is frequently different than that needed for success in school (27) (28). Thus, school attendance may not be regular, achievement in school may not be important, and children may extend their activities unsupervised by parents into many areas which may interfere with learning to read (4). When these children do have problems in school, the parents may let everyone, including the child, know how dumb that he is and may motivate him to apply himself by physical punishment or verbal abuse (22).

Studies of the reasons why pupils fail in reading (23) and comparisons between good and poor readers (24) show that social and emotional difficulties do cause reading problems. Parents may try to help poor readers but may have problems due to expecting too much too soon (13). Thus, they may increase the social and emotional problems making it even more difficult to motivate the child to improve his reading ability.

Self-Concept. Children develop a self-concept which is generally completed before adolescence. Love, acceptance, and confidence shown to children will help them build a good self-concept. Lack of love, acceptance, and confidence may lead to feelings of insecurity, inattention, antagonism, loneliness, and indecision. Since the self-concept is a

result of interaction between a person and his environment, this learned behavior can be modified. However, unless someone who is a significant person in the child's life can help him to see that he is capable and worthwhile, he may continue to have a self-concept of insignificance which may interfere with learning to read (10) (25).

Interfamily Relationships. Children from disadvantaged families may have so many family problems that learning to read may not receive much attention. Cavan's description of the lower class family unit (4) shows that in some respects the stable and continuing family unit is the mother and children. The marriage bond is weak so that there are desertions, separations, and divorces that destroy the family unit. Men are employed in semiskilled or unskilled labor jobs that come and go with changes in the market. Therefore, income is low and uncertain; savings are small; and the accumulation of wealth impossible. Many rent homes and move frequently, causing neighborhood and school adjustment problems for children. Lower class families have a higher average of children than any other social class. Thus, many children have far from ideal relationships with their parents and other members of the family, and the concerns connected with low income and a lack of security may receive a higher priority than achievements in school.

Effect of Moving. Many families move each year to new homes. Children change schools, leave their schoolmates, and may move into entirely different communities. When studying an entire community, the number of moves pupils make does not cause a loss in reading achievement (26).

As many children move from area to area, they have an opportunity to do exciting things which will give them a background for reading. But it is one thing for a father to receive a promotion to a new job in another location and another for a rural migrant to move to a large city in search of unskilled work. Some children may move because the family has had a mortgage foreclosure, cannot pay the rent, or the father must move on to have work (1) (14). Therefore, disadvantaged children may be moving under very difficult circumstances, and these may well interfere with learning to read.

Reading in the Home. Some children come to school with such a lack of experiences that beginning reading will be a most difficult task (21). Middle class children have exciting family trips, have a variety of materials such as books and manipulative materials, and have many books read to them before they come to school (17). Disadvantaged children may not have this help. Many do not have a home where reading is done by parents. The number of books, newspapers, magazines, and other reading materials in the home directly relates to the interest that a child has in reading (20). Children need a home where reading materials are available and where an example of reading is set by the parents. All too often, this example is not available to children who become the poor readers in schools.

Educational Causes of Reading Failure

Reading failure can be permitted and even encouraged by inappropriate methods and activities in schools. Teachers need to be sympathetic,

understanding, and sensitive to children and their problems. If they are not, children may get off to a bad start in school and will not be motivated to change poor self-concepts or to improve in reading. Parents may be ignored and not given help in solving children's problems. Lack of thorough readiness programs, too difficult initial reading materials, unavailable materials in classrooms for reluctant readers, inadequate ancillary reading programs, and poor management techniques all contribute to reading failure in school.

Every child would like to read well, but children who have met with failure in school may have inattention in class, be easily distracted, exhibit misbehavior, have a lack of persistance, and be unwilling to try (9). Poor readers exhibit more negative desires and more maladjustive classroom behavior than good readers (11). Teachers who are not understanding of these children may cause confrontations with them that will further complicate the reading problem. Some disadvantaged children will respond to one approach while another child will need a different kind of help. Each teacher must consider each child as an individual and seek to help him with his own particular problems (12).

Helping Parents. Educational problems can be created by a negative approach in working with parents who may talk with the teacher only when a problem arises. All children do some things well, and these fine things can be mentioned during conferences. If, on the other hand, everyone is trying to blame or condemn someone else, children will surely

be subjected to further unhappy situations which do not make reading a very pleasant subject. Parents can help by using more appropriate motivation, by better understanding their child's problem, and by helping tutor their child in those areas of reading where they can best help as mutually agreed upon between teacher and parent (2) (8) (12).

Readiness and Initial Reading. Formal reading instruction should begin when a child is ready. He is ready when he has adequate background of experiences, oral language ability, conceptual development, mental maturity, personal adjustment, and physical development (3) (21). A good readiness program will help prepare a child for formal reading, and such factors as readiness tests, mental age, and teacher judgment can help determine when readiness has been achieved. Classes can be organized for extended readiness (15), or the primary grades can be upgraded so that each child can move at his own rate. Materials and methods should be appropriate for each child. One publisher is providing a screening test to help place children in basal readers at the beginning of a new adoption or for new student who moves into a school district (5). Whatever the program and method used, the stigma of failure should be avoided.

Corrective Reading. Each reading teacher in regular classrooms can cause further reading problems by failure to provide for those students who have fallen behind others in the room. These children need materials appropriate for their interests and achievement.

Also, the teacher and children need to feel that progress can be made (9). Informal or formal group diagnosis, high interest materials at the proper reading level, and understanding of children and their problems are needed in every classroom to prevent and correct reading problems.

Ancillary Reading Programs. Not all reading problems can be solved through extended readiness programs or in corrective reading groups in the classroom. Some children have problems so severe that they can be helped only in small groups or on a one-to-one basis. Lack of provision of such programs would result in failures that could have been corrected in the school.

Many remedial reading programs have been established to provide small group instruction by experienced and competent teachers. There is need in these programs for special attention to diagnosis and planning. These children have many needs and interests, and curriculum must be planned by the teachers from a variety of materials available since no one program meets the needs of all children.

Children in remedial reading classes tend to have a short attention span, so planning should include a variety of materials and activities for each session. Diagnosis should seek to determine the achievement of children in such areas as vocabulary, word attack skills, comprehension, oral and silent reading, and recreational reading. Also, teachers need to understand and be sensitive to the problems that each individual has. Then lesson plans can be developed that truly meet the needs of each child.

One-to-one clinical instruction by highly trained teachers is very

expensive and thus rare. Yet, many children cannot be helped without highly trained professional reading clinicians working with them on an individual basis. A skilled clinician can diagnose the reading problem, provide help to the child to correct many serious problems, and work with the remedial and classroom teachers and parents to help children solve their reading problems.

Summer classes can be organized to help children catch up during a time when other students are out of school. Many schools are empty during the summer months, and excellent teachers are available to help children in a relaxed summer atmosphere. Some children need more time than others, and, if appropriate methods and materials are used, children can improve their reading ability during the summer. The summer months can also be used to prevent loss in reading ability. One study (14) showed that children who had just completed the first grade lost about 20 percent of their reading ability during the summer and that boys were lower than girls in achievement, a fact shown in many studies (6). A television program was presented 40 times, one half hour each day, utilizing a workbooks, to children during the next summer. This experiemental group had no overall loss during the summer, and those children who watched over half of the programs actually gained as a whole in reading ability. Also, boys made higher percentage gains in test scores in the program that was designed especially to interest them.

Volunteers can be used very effectively with children who need reading help. College students,parents, and other adults may work with schools in tutoring programs. Upper grade children can help lower

grade children learn basic sight words, can work with them in workbooks or other skill books, and can listen to children read aloud. The diagnosis of children's reading problems and the planning of the methods and materials should be done by teachers, but many good and wholesome tasks can be accomplished on an individual basis by volunteer tutors.

Management of the School Reading Program. All solutions to reading problems do not cost more money. Reading problems can be caused by management of resources and personnel in ways that are not efficient. Schools in the United States have been the grateful recipients of federal funds which have been used to purchase many new materials. Phonics records, sight cards, skill books, workbooks, and supplementary reading books were bought with these funds. This abundance of materials brough logistical and organizational problems never before experienced in the schools. Today, a real problem exists in getting the right material to the right child at the right time (16). Good management techniques call for leadership in the reading program in each school. Those schools that have a reading center, a teacher in charge of the center, and a reading committee will be in a good position to help teachers have proper materials for children with reading problems.

If reading is important, then schools will have an environment conducive to preventing and correcting reading problems. This environment would encourage an examination of any issue or questions pertaining to reading failure. The reading specialist and school reading

committee would know that their work would receive prompt attention and be consequential in policy decisions. This combination of intellectual climate, curriculum priority, and decisionmaking style would assure that reading failure due to educational causes would be substantially reduced.

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